

A Guide for Effective Public Comments

As a citizen of the Commonwealth of Virginia, you have the right to voice your opinion regarding matters pending before the air, water and waste boards and the Department of Environmental Quality. One way to have your views heard is to speak at public meetings and hearings and submit written comments during public comment periods. You may also speak at board meetings or submit written comments of your testimony for the official file.

DEQ, the Air Pollution Control Board, the State Water Control Board and the Waste Management Board encourage public participation and have adopted procedures that establish the times and the protocols for the public to submit appropriate comment for consideration. This guide offers suggestions for providing effective public comments.

Glossary

Public comment period: The time allowed for members of the public to express their views and concerns regarding an action by DEQ or one of the citizen boards.

Public hearing: A formal meeting where a board member or DEQ hears the public's views and concerns about an action or proposal. Public hearings may be a requirement or held upon request during the public comment period.

Public meeting: A formal meeting held by some DEQ programs where the public can submit oral comments on an issue.

Information meeting: An informal meeting where DEQ and members of the public can discuss specific environmental issues.

For more information

- To learn about scheduled public comment periods, public meetings, public hearings or board meetings, see the DEQ website at www.deq.virginia.gov.
- The Virginia Regulatory Town Hall website is another source of meeting information on proposed regulations open for comment. Register for email notifications from the Virginia Regulatory Town Hall at www.townhall.virginia.gov.

Special tips for effective comments

- ✓ One way to ensure effective comments is to know the facts.
- ✓ Understand a board's legal authority to act and what issues board members can address.
- ✓ Read the material available on the subject.
- ✓ Target specific issues and cite specific provisions.
- ✓ Include facts, data, experiences and other evidence that support your position.
- ✓ Respond to the views of others based on their merit and avoid personal attacks.
- ✓ Provide specific ideas or suggestions for solving the problems you have identified.
- ✓ Keep your comments short and to the point.

Written comments

- Should be submitted to the contact person listed in the public notice or the person chairing the public meeting or public hearing (not directly to members of the board).
- Must be submitted before the announced close of the public comment period in order to be considered.
- Must include your name and address.
- May be as long or as short as necessary.

* There are special requirements for written comments submitted at public meetings, hearings and board meetings. (See back page.)

Public hearings / public meetings

- You will need to register. You will be asked to provide your name, the organization you represent, if any, and your address. You may be asked to indicate whether you are a proponent or opponent of the matter at hand.
- The person chairing the meeting/hearing will determine what time limits, if any, are imposed and will announce the guidelines at the beginning of the meeting/hearing.
- Be prepared to adjust your presentation to the time limits.
- Be prepared to adapt your remarks to avoid making the same point made by previous speakers.
- Be prepared to answer questions that the meeting/hearing chair might have.
- All remarks should be factual and directly related to the subject of the meeting/hearing. For example, remarks on discharge permits for wastewater facilities should be related to whether the draft permit complies with the water quality standards adopted by the board; not whether the facility should exist at all. The General Assembly has given certain authority to each board under which a board must operate and remarks should be targeted to whether the action proposed is in compliance with the law.
- It is recommended that you have at least one copy of your remarks available to submit for the public comment file. If the written testimony is lengthy, quickly summarize the material so other speakers might be heard. DEQ will also accept written testimony in lieu of an oral presentation. All comments relative to the purpose of the meeting/hearing will be considered regardless of whether the comments are submitted orally or in writing.
- DEQ staff chairing a meeting or the hearing officer should be addressed from the speaker's podium. Professional and respectful behavior is expected from all participants. Outbursts and remarks from the audience are prohibited.
- When you come to the speaker's podium, introduce yourself and then succinctly state the purpose of your testimony; e.g., I am Jane Doe and I am here to suggest changes to the discharge permit for Smith Development.
- For interpreter services or other accommodations, contact the DEQ staff person listed for the meeting/hearing at least seven days prior to the meeting.

Board meetings

- You will need to register. You will be asked to provide your name and the organization you represent, if any. You may be asked to indicate whether you are a proponent or opponent of the matter at hand.
- Prepare your remarks in accordance with the provisions of the board's policy for public comment at board meetings. The full text of the each board's policy is available on the DEQ website at www.deq.virginia.gov and is published with each agenda for the meeting.
- Generally, comments on a specific action are allowed if you commented during the public comment period, are not to exceed three minutes and are to address the summary of comments provided to the board. During the public forum, comments are not to exceed three minutes and can be on any subject that is not on the agenda and is not a pending decision of the board.
- Be prepared to adjust your presentation in the event the time limits contained in the board's policy are changed.
- Be prepared to adapt your remarks to avoid making the same point made by previous speakers.
- Coordinate with others who have similar views to streamline presentations and focus comments on the issues.
- Be prepared to answer questions that the members of the board might have.
- It is not necessary to have written copies of your statement to accompany your oral remarks. However, if you do, you should bring at least 10 copies of your statement.
- Board members should be addressed from the speaker's podium. Professional and respectful behavior is expected from all participants. Outbursts and remarks from the audience are prohibited.
- When you come to the speaker's podium, introduce yourself and succinctly state the purpose of your testimony; e.g., I am Jane Doe and I am here to suggest changes to the discharge permit for Smith Development.
- For interpreter services or other accommodations, contact the DEQ staff person listed for the meeting at least seven days prior to the meeting.